Defense Report

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Quadrennial Defense Review: From 1997 to 2001

Genesis of the Quadrennial Defense Review

The 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) was just the latest in a series of Pentagon studies, including the 1991 Base Force Study and the 1993 Bottom-Up Review (BUR), designed to reevaluate strategy and force structure. Dissatisfied with the BUR, Congress established a Commission on Roles and Missions (CORM) with the 1994 Defense Authorization Act. The CORM recommended instituting a strategy review at four-year intervals; in response, Congress passed the Armed Forces Force Structure Act of 1996 (as part of Public Law 104-201, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1997), mandating the first QDR.

Congress felt the end of the Cold War required a fundamental defense review. As the legislation put it: "The pace of global change necessitates a new, comprehensive assessment of the defense strategy of the United States and the force structure of the Armed Forces required to meet the threats to the United States in the twenty-first century." The QDR was needed because Congress found fault with the BUR, specifying three criticisms in the legislation:

"(A) the assumptions underlying the strategy of planning to fight and win two nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts;

"(B) the force levels recommended to carry out that strategy; and

"(C) the funding proposed for such recommended force levels."

Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), in expressing his goals for the QDR, highlighted the reasons so many were frustrated by the BUR: "Our intent in sponsoring this legislation was to drive the defense debate to a strategy-based assessment of our future military requirements and capabilities, not to a budget-driven incremental massage of the status quo."

Further demonstrating its distrust of the traditional defense review process, Congress also authorized the creation of the National Defense Panel (NDP) to perform its own independent study. Though its commissioners were to be selected by the Secretary of Defense, the NDP was directed to undertake a formal critique of the Department of Defense (DoD)-run QDR. The NDP's report was to include "an independent assessment of a variety of possible force structures of the Armed Forces through the year 2010 and beyond."

The QDR itself was specifically tasked to prepare, by 15 May 1997, a "comprehensive examination of the defense strategy, force structure, force modernization plans, infrastructure, budget plan, and other elements of the defense program and policies with a view toward determining and expressing the defense strategy of the United States and establishing a revised defense program through the year 2005."

DoD's efforts were somewhat disrupted by the arrival in January 1997 of a new Secretary of Defense, who then had less than five months to produce the report. DoD created seven panels that worked in parallel: strategy, modernization, force assessment, readiness, infrastructure, human resources, and information operations and intelligence. In addition, each service had its own active QDR effort to ensure its vision was represented and its priorities protected. The services tended to view the QDR process as a zero-sum game, and competition within the Pentagon was fierce.

Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen delivered the report on the QDR to Congress on 15 May 1997, to less than rave reviews.

QDR Results

The QDR did little to alter the status quo, but called for across-the-board cuts to all services in light of forecasted fiscal constraints. The report endorsed the National Security Strategy's "shape, respond, prepare" approach, Joint Vision 2010's "full spectrum dominance," and the BUR's force-sizing requirement of being "capable of fighting and winning two major theater wars nearly simultaneously."

The QDR report identified three possible paths to determine force structure: Path 1: Focus on Near-Term Demands; Path 2: Preparing for a More Distant Threat; and Path 3: Balance Current Demands and an Uncertain Future. The QDR came down in favor of the third path—the compromise solution. This path aimed to balance continued participation in small-scale contingencies such as Bosnia and preparation for two major theater wars, while still investing in modernization to contend with the possibility of a future competitor.

Since the QDR evaluated each alternative based on an assumption of constant defense budgets of $250 billion (in Fiscal Year 1997 dollars), it had to identify force structure cuts to make the strategy, in its words, "fiscally executable." As a result:

- Total active duty endstrength was cut by 60,000 to 1,360,000; reserves were cut by 55,000 to 835,000; and the civilian workforce was cut by 80,000 to 640,000.

- The Army saw active duty endstrength cuts of 15,000; reserve cuts of 45,000 (though 25,000 have since been rescinded); and civilian workforce cuts of 34,000. The Army retained all 10 of its active, combat-ready divisions.

- The Navy saw endstrength cuts totaling 22,100 from active and reserve components, and it lost 12 surface combatants, 23 submarines, and 452 of its proposed procurement of F/A-18E/F fighters. It retained all 12 of its carrier battle groups.

- The Air Force's active duty endstrength dropped by 27,000, and it lost 16 bombers and one of four proposed F-22 wings.

- The Marine Corps' active duty endstrength dropped by 1,800, and its reserve endstrength dropped by 4,200. Its planned purchase of V-22s was cut by 65.

In addition, the QDR highlighted as priorities National Missile Defense research and the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction. It also envisioned savings from two more Base Realignment and Closure rounds, and from a Defense Reform Task Force that would identify inefficiencies.

The QDR was not well received. It was generally viewed as a run-of-the-mill DoD study that failed to challenge the status quo by making difficult choices and setting priorities. The congressionally-mandated independent National Defense Panel, chaired by BDM chairman Philip A. Odeen, criticized the QDR for rubber-stamping a force structure inherited from the Cold War and not sufficiently addressing asymmetric threats and homeland defense. The QDR spared every major weapon system, and most of the its force structure cuts had already been programmed.

The other major criticism hinged on the QDR's self-imposed fiscal constraints, which were contrary to Congress' intentions for the effort. Furthermore, the NDP noted "insufficient connectivity between strategy on the one hand, and force structure, operational concepts, and procurement decision on the other." Adding insult to injury, the "QDR force" is widely believed to be massively underfunded. One recent study puts the shortfall at about $100 billion a year, even at current budget levels that are higher than the QDR's projections.

QDR 2001

The Pentagon already is gearing up for the second Quadrennial Defense Review. Congress, as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000 (Public Law 106-65), mandated that the Department of Defense produce the report by 30 September 2001. The QDR will face a compressed time-line due to the arrival of a new administration in January.

While there is no National Defense Panel planned this time, Congress earlier established a Commission on National Security/21st Century (also known as the Hart-Rudman Commission) to undertake a sweeping review of national security strategy. This panel has released the first two of its three reports, which, like the NDP, focus attention on homeland defense and question the two-major-theater-war concept.

Congress has tasked DoD to address a specific set of issues in its defense review and to establish a defense program for the next 20 years. The major topics listed in the legislation are being referred to in some circles as the "13 Questions." In plain language, they are:

1) What are the U.S. defense strategy and the force structure needed to implement it at a low to moderate level of risk?

2) What are the national security interests?

3) What are the threats?

4) What are the assumptions regarding readiness; allies and coalition operations; warning times; involvement in operations other than war (OOTW) and small-scale contingencies (SSCs); and the intensity, duration, and military and political end-states of conflicts and SSCs?

5) What is the effect of participation in SSCs on force structure and readiness for high-intensity combat?

6) What manpower and sustainment policies are needed to support engagement in conflicts lasting longer than 120 days?

7) What are the anticipated roles and missions of the reserve components, as well as their necessary strength, capabilities and equipment?

8) What is the appropriate ratio of combat forces to support forces, including the size of headquarters units and Defense agencies?

9) What strategic and tactical airlift, sealift and ground transportation capabilities are needed?

10) What forward presence, prepositioning and other anticipatory deployments are necessary?

11) What resources need to be shifted among two or more theaters in the event of multiple conflicts?

12) Does the Unified Command Plan need to be revised?

13) How will technology effect force structure over the next 20 years?

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